Mexican Gothic

I. THEORY: FEMALE GOTHIC

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DEFINING FEMALE GOTHIC

- ‘[I]n Radcliffean Gothic female characters experience the violence of a male-dominated world, foreshadowing or mirroring the ways in which the heroine falls prey to a male villain. As a matter of fact, metaphors of entrapment and literal imprisonment frame the heroine’s experience through powerlessness, as the latter is taken time and again to “her prison.” [Juliann] Fleenor’s [1983] definition of “Female Gothic,” which encapsulates and redefines Ellen Moers’s initial coining of the term [in 1978], claims that such Gothic is grounded on the patriarchal paradigm that “the woman is motherless, defective, and defined by a male God.” The self-divided heroine is a “reflection of patriarchal values,” and her quest frequently leads her to investigate “whether she is anything but reflection.” Such feminist views posit that, even if the threats jeopardizing the life of the heroine are often dispelled by the end of the novel, the plots foreground female victimization in order to dramatize women’s self-abnegating role within patriarchy.’
- - Laurence Tailrach-Vielmas, ‘Madwomen and Attics’, in Women and the Gothic (2016), p. 33

‘In traditional Gothic, young women are pursued by rapacious men of power (see *Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe 1794; *Castle of Otranto*, Walpole 1764; and *The Monk*, Lewis, 1796). They are rescued by rightful lovers and swept into the oblivion of eternal love, while these rescuers and society try to constrict and pin them down with an outdated ritualized male gaze. It is a process of collection, shrinkage and ownership. The women collude with this rescue into family, male power and marriage.’

– Gina Wisker, ‘Angela Carter: Living in Gothic Times’, p. 39

FEMALE GOTHIC IN GOTHIC ENCYCLOPEDIA

As first coined by Ellen Moers in 1976, the term “Female Gothic” simply referred to the work written by women in the mode of the Gothic since the eighteenth century. However, the term has since then become increasingly contested. It is usually taken to refer to work in the tradition of Ann Radcliffe’s novels, which centralize a heroine who is threatened with imprisonment in a castle or great house by a male tyrant (often a father or father substitute), and who escapes through labyrinthine passages and sublime landscapes to marry the man she loves and, often, find her lost mother. The prototype is Radcliffe’s second novel, A Sicilian Romance (1790), in which Julia flees her father’s castle to avoid a forced marriage and, after a series of adventures, discovers her supposedly dead mother imprisoned by her husband in a cave-like dungeon beneath the castle so that he can remarry. The ghostly sounds that haunt the castle are thus revealed to have their source in the mother’s captivity and Julia chooses to share this if she cannot “deliver her mother to freedom” (Radcliffe 1993: 181).

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Initial critical accounts of the female Gothic turned to psychoanalysis, reading these structural conventions in literary and popular texts as a narrative of psychic individuation and the struggle against obliteration (through death or marriage) within patriarchal structures. Critics varied as to whether they saw the genre as a radical expression of subversive protest or as a conservative reinforcement of domestic ideology. Norman Holland and Leona Sherman's article "Gothic Possibilities" (1977) identified the key elements that remained constant from the eighteenth century to the "modern Gothic" as "the image of woman-plus-habitation and the plot **of mysterious** sexual and supernatural threats in an atmosphere of dynastic mysteries" (Holland and Sherman 1977: 279). Reading the castle as a fluid "potential space" that accepts different projections of "unconscious material" and can thus symbolize both the hard/sexual father and the nurturing or sexual mother whose body is the ultimate mystery, they see the genre as ultimately conservative (see sex). Developing these ideas, Claire Kahane in "The Gothic Mirror" (1985) reads the female Gothic as a version of the Oedipal plot with, at its center, "the spectral presence of the deadundead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront" (Kahane1985: 336). Drawing on the work of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, Kahane analyzes the Gothic as an expression of the female child's struggle to separate from the mother as a mirror image that is both self and other (see psychoanalysis). … Here the female body itself … is the imprisoning Gothic structure.

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The images of imprisonment associated with the Gothic and the doubles invoked by Kahane are central to the single “secret plot” seen as underlying the wider nineteenth-century tradition of women’s writing discussed in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s hugely influential The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). Identifying an anxiety of authorship common to women writers, they argue that this is expressed through mad, monstrous, and fiercely independent figures who act as the author’s double within the text, articulating their repressed desire to escape from male houses and male texts. The paradigmatic figure is Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in the attic, whom they read as Jane Eyre’s dark double. Shelley’s Frankenstein as a reworking of Milton’s motherless Eve and Austen’s Northanger Abbey as a truly “Gothic” story that describes the horrors that result when women are brought to distrust their own judgment both fit within this model. Like Doody, Gilbert and Gubar read this Gothic plot as one of subversion and radical female protest.

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Typically, the male Gothic, exemplified by Matthew Lewis' The Monk (1796), itself a revision of Radcliffe's work, centers on the transgressions of a male over-reacher who defies social taboos, and includes graphically detailed violence, often sexual and directed against objectified women. In her useful analysis of the differences between the male and female formulae in Art of Darkness (1995), Anne Williams suggests that they can be located at the level of narrative technique, plot, assumptions about the supernatural, and use of horror/terror. The female version centralizes a female point of view, culminates in a happy ending, explains the supernatural, and tends toward terror, while the male version uses multiple points of view, more often has a tragic ending or resists closure, includes real ghosts, and favors horror.

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From the mid-1990s onwards, when Robert Miles (1994) suggested that psychoanalytic approaches had reached an impasse, the term “female Gothic” has been increasingly contested as oversimplistic and potentially essentializing (Smith and Wallace 2004). Various alternatives have been coined: Clery’s “women’s Gothic,” Diane Long Hoeveler’s “Gothic feminism” (1998), Suzanne Becker’s “Feminine Gothic”
(1999), and Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz’s “postfeminist Gothic” (2007). Nevertheless, recent work … suggests the continued relevance and potential flexibility of this critical category. Moreover, the female Gothic has been central not only to the development of feminist literary criticism but also to what Lauren Fitzgerald (2004) has called the “institutionalization of Gothic studies” within the academy.

The term ‘Female Gothic’ has become much contested. When Ellen Moers coined the term in 1976 she thought that it could be ‘easily defined’ as ‘the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic’. A definition of ‘the Gothic’ was, however, ‘not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear’ (90). Moers’s pioneering work – two brief chapters in a book which was one of the earliest attempts to trace and value on its own terms a distinctive female tradition of writing – opened up what proved to be a very fertile field for critics. It can be seen as directly influential in the establishing of both women’s writing and the Gothic as central areas in literary studies. Since the early 1990s, however, there has been considerable debate over the usefulness of the ‘Female Gothic’ as a separate literary category or genre. A variety of other terms have been offered, some alternative, others more specific: ‘women’s Gothic’, ‘feminist Gothic’, ‘lesbian Gothic’, ‘Gothic feminism’ and, most recently, ‘postfeminist Gothic’. In a recent critique Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall have suggested that: “the construction since the 1970s of the predominantly universalizing category of the ‘female Gothic’, as an embodiment of some invariable female ‘experience’ or of the archetypal ‘female principle’, leads straight out of history into the timeless melodrama in which (wicked) ‘male Gothic’ texts always express terror of the eternal ‘(M)other’ while (good) female Gothic texts are revealed to be – as Anne Williams claims – not just ‘empowering’ but ‘revolutionary.’” Their comments are part of a wider critique of what they see as a radically misguided tendency to privilege psychoanalytic interpretations above historicist ones in the criticism of Gothic texts: ‘the collapse of history into universal psychology’ (218). While we would strongly support the necessity for historically aware criticism, their comments seem to simplify what is a far more complex and rigorous body of work than they allow here. Most importantly their account could be regarded as implicitly marginalising the (feminist) politics of this criticism.

The debate over whether the Female Gothic could be seen as subversive or conservative was given a further twist by Diane Long Hoeveler's Gothic Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës (1998) which contentiously saw in it the origins of modern so-called 'victim feminism'. The heroines of Gothic novels, Hoeveler contended, masquerade as blameless victims of a corrupt and oppressive patriarchal society while utilising passive-aggressive and masochistic strategies to triumph over that system. This ideology of 'female power through pretended and staged weakness' is what Hoeveler calls 'Gothic feminism'.

Catherine Spooner further comments: 'Hoeveler identifies a feminism that is to a certain degree unsettling in that, to a modern reader, it is too complacent in its acceptance of patriarchy as the status quo and in the way it revalues the conventionally feminine rather than challenging gender binaries … a distinctively white, middle-class and disembodied kind of feminism, ideologically motivated by the "dream of riding above the corrupt body, the dream of becoming masculinized – all mind, all reason"' ('Unsettling Feminism')

any of the problems with Female Gothic as a critical category which became
ident in the 1990s – that it is ‘unsatisfyingly simple’ and ‘common-sense’,
couraging ‘certain assumptions’ about ‘the intrinsic “femaleness” of Gothic fiction’
‘accepting gender as the bedrock of explanation’ – were themselves difficulties
at post-structuralist theory of the 1980s had discovered in American feminist
erary criticism more generally. (One could perhaps posit, then, that like Moers’s
inage, the reaction against Female Gothic was a product of a specific historical
oment, in this case, English studies after theory.) It might be too that just as feminism
crued costs through institutionalisation, as Ellen Messer-Davidow has recently
arted, so did Gothic studies, though, admittedly, at a somewhat lower price.
hereas feminism failed to transform the academy that it was co-opted by, Gothic
iticism, as Howells continues, merely fails to ‘pay ... close attention to the slippages
d oddities in these texts now that we have ready made theoretical perspectives
rough which to read them’.

LAUREN FITZGERALD, ‘THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF GOTHIC STUDIES’